

The President's Preface

By Robert Darnton

Historians have enough difficulties spotting trends in the past, so they should shy away from making pronouncements about the present. Nonetheless, I think the following report documents a turning point in the history of the American Historical Association. In 1999 the AHA reversed two years of deficits and moved its finances decisively into a healthier state. After a long search for a new executive director, the Council enthusiastically elected Arnita Jones, the executive director of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), to manage the Association's affairs. She moved into office in late May and immediately set an amicable tone and a brisk pace for the business under way at the AHA headquarters. Having managed itself with remarkable effectiveness for the previous four months, the staff breathed a collective sigh of relief and settled into a more sustainable rhythm of work.

With old business dispatched and the books balanced, new projects could be undertaken. A grant from the Ford Foundation made possible a meeting of community college teachers at the Library of Congress to develop new pedagogical approaches to regional studies and world history. Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age, a program to improve introductory survey courses, was developed in three state university systems, thanks to support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. After smoothing out some rough patches in its relations with its 105 affiliated societies, the AHA adopted new policies governing their participation in the annual meeting and new modes of collaboration, including a special listserv for e-mail discussions and counseling about electronic publications. The staff redesigned the *Directory of History Departments and Organizations in the United States and Canada*. Although the old version provided a basic guide to the history profession as a whole, it did not mention a significant proportion of

part-time, adjunct, and independent historians and could not be used to locate individuals and discover who was working on specific subjects. A new directory, published online, provides information about 8,000 members of the AHA and the topics of their research. We now plan to publish a print version of this individual directory as an addition to the departmental directory and to use it as a way of drawing a profile of the profession at the start of the new century.

With help from a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we launched the Gutenberg-e program. It is aimed at a critical point where problems in library budgets, scholarly publishing, and scholars' careers all converge. By organizing a prize competition for the best dissertations in fields where university presses have ceased publishing monographs, it will help beginning historians to overcome the biggest hurdle in their careers. The prizes are grants that must be used to convert the dissertations into first-rate electronic books. By helping the historians, the program will promote a new form of scholarly publication and set standards for properly edited and peer-reviewed work on the Internet. A distinguished panel of judges selected the first winners who were announced at the AHA meeting in Chicago in January, and in March the winners discussed the problems and possibilities of electronic publishing at a workshop organized by Columbia University Press, which should put out the first "e-books" at the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Michael Grossberg and the staff of the *American Historical Review* prepared to take a still greater leap forward into cyberspace. After long study and heavy bouts of skepticism, they concluded that the *AHR* would have to go online. But how? The modalities triggered even longer debates. An e-*AHR* could be designed in many ways and linked to different online organizations. In the end, Grossberg recommended that the AHA join with the OAH and two leaders in the field ■■■

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